

The Church Advocate

During the nineteenth century, religious newspapers served as an integral source of information for numerous churchgoing individuals. Articles about the finer points of theology, minutes of denominational meetings, and developments regarding domestic and foreign missions filled the pages of these organs and kept ministers and laity informed about current ecclesiastical issues. The Civil War, however, caused editors and correspondents to include matters related to war and politics in addition to typical religious fare. The *Church Advocate*, the Church of God's national weekly published in Lancaster, is a little-known source that reveals aspects of daily life on the Pennsylvania home front and relates the experiences of soldiers in camp and on the battlefield. It underscores how numerous Northern citizens interpreted the war as a contest permeated with religious meaning. Like other religious weeklies, the *Church Advocate* reprinted the latest war news from the *New York Times* or other national papers, but it never lost sight of its primary purpose to promote the beliefs of the Church of God throughout the country. Although more prominent denominational organs such as the Methodist *Western Christian Advocate* included matters of local interest, the *Church Advocate* generally devoted more space to publishing letters of soldiers and civilians. Anyone interested in the religious and social history of the Civil War will find this paper to be a real treasure.

While a few Church of God members claimed that believers should not engage in warfare, most correspondents to the *Church Advocate* and the paper's editors gave their wholehearted support to the Union war effort. For instance, Carlisle resident S. M. Hoover boldly asserted that "the army of our Lord, and the army of our beloved country . . . are so closely allied . . . that the latter cannot exist independent of the former."¹ This confidence in the ultimate success of Union arms rarely wavered, even when the home front felt the hard hand of war. Firsthand descriptions of rebel armies invading the Keystone State, a graphic account of a tragic arsenal explosion in Pittsburgh in September 1862 that took the lives of scores of children who assembled cartridges and shells, and scenes from a field hospital in York after the battle of Antietam all attest to the brutalities of war witnessed by these religious Pennsylvanians.

In addition to presenting perspectives from the home front, the

¹ *Church Advocate*, Sept. 26, 1861.

Church Advocate published numerous letters from soldiers, typically three to five each week. Some enlisted men focused on spiritual themes and depicted incidents at prayer meetings, recounted their striving against sins endemic to camp, or admonished readers to pray for them. Others supplied detailed accounts of battle, such as one member of the 3rd Pennsylvania who reported felling several rebel standard-bearers during the Seven Days' battles. A soldier in the 103rd Pennsylvania who survived the fighting at Williamsburg, Virginia, in May 1862, afterwards marveled, "The shot fell thick and fast all around me, but it pleased God to spare my life, perhaps for some purpose unknown to me."²

Denominational papers such as the *Church Advocate* provide valuable insights into the lives of religious citizens by revealing their beliefs and values while drawing attention to the challenges they faced because of the momentous changes brought about by the Civil War. Perhaps nothing demonstrates the real tensions of that period better than a description of a New Year's watch night service in Shippensburg, Pennsylvania. After reading scripture and praying until 1862 had passed, minister H. L. Soule directed the congregation to rise and, as the first act of 1863, sing "The year of jubilee is come." Most members heartily obliged, but a few kept silent. Soule was troubled that these "professed Christians" could be so insensitive to the plight of slaves, a telling sign to him that these "misguided souls" were "filled with gross darkness" and had their vision obstructed by "political blindness."³ Nearly 150 years later, students of the Civil War need not stumble in historical darkness, for an understudied resource such as the *Church Advocate* ably illuminates the lives and experiences of religious correspondents from Pennsylvania to Iowa. Obtaining a copy of the paper, however, is challenging. I perused microfilmed copies of the *Church Advocate* at Bowling Green State University's Center for Archival Collections. In 1979 publication of the weekly shifted to Findlay, Ohio, and BGSU's copies were filmed from originals held at Winebrenner Theological Seminary in Findlay. Although a few other libraries have two or three nonconsecutive issues published during the Civil War, no archives apart from these two locales in western Ohio possess a complete run of this valuable source.

Christopher Newport University

SEAN A. SCOTT

² Ibid., June 5, 1862.

³ Ibid., Jan. 8, 1863.